

THE
SPEECH

OF

J. C. CURWEN, ESQ. M. P.

IN THE

HOUSE OF COMMONS,

On the 28th of May, 1816.

ON A MOTION FOR A COMMITTEE FOR TAKING
INTO CONSIDERATION THE

State of the Poor Laws.

SECOND EDITION.

LONDON.

1816.

Substance

OF

A SPEECH,

&c.

MR. SPEAKER,

IN compliance with the notice which I have given, I am now about to call the attention of the House to one of the most important subjects which can occupy its deliberations; in which all ranks of society are deeply interested; namely, the enormous and progressively increasing burden imposed for the maintenance of the poor. This increase has still not kept pace with their increasing misery, during the same period. Whilst the resources of the country have been exhausted, their sufferings have been aggravated. As it is the interest, so it must be the wish of all, that for these great and growing evils some remedy should be adopted.

In presuming to bring forward a matter of so difficult and complex a nature, much apology on my part is necessary. I have not, however, had the rashness to enter on it as a volunteer: it is undertaken at the express instance of

my constituents, and in consequence of a promise which I made to them. I have not ventured to take it up till I had ascertained that His Majesty's ministers had no such intention, and till all hope had ceased of any gentleman, more competent to the task, engaging in it.

In the north-western counties, and particularly in the neighbourhood of Carlisle, great inconvenience is sustained from the influx of Irish and Scotch in search of employment: failing in this, they become a charge to the rates, and after forty day's residence are not removable. Two several bills were introduced into this House for relieving the northern part of the kingdom from the burden of these settlers. It was imputed to me, that I was instrumental in defeating these two bills, and I do admit that, great as were the evils which they were intended to cure, they appeared to me measures so unjust and oppressive, as not to deserve the countenance of Parliament.¹ To procure the relief which the case required, a material change in the law of settlements must have been effected; and the difficulties attending this were not much less than those which a review of the whole system imposes.

It is undoubtedly desirable, that all measures of this importance should originate under the sanction of government: their channels of information are so much more numerous and accurate, and the support which they are enabled to give to measures, which must be attended with numerous obstacles, is much more likely to overcome them. Still I am bound, in justice, to return the noble lord my thanks for the ready support which he has been disposed to give, in order to bring before the House the plan which I mean to propose. The subject is one, undoubtedly, unconnected with all party feelings, and requires the aid and sup-

¹ Power was given to overseers to remove any native of Scotland or Ireland who might appear to them likely to become chargeable.

port of the abilities on all sides the House, which it shall be my object to obtain. The call, on the part of the country, on this House, to go into an inquiry on the poor laws, has been general: I trust therefore, however unequal to the task, that I shall meet with indulgence proportioned to its difficulties. With the aid of a committee composed of gentlemen most conversant with the subject, a bill may, I flatter myself, be formed, which may afford a remedy for the existing evils.

In this late period of the sessions, it is true, much progress cannot be expected to be made. Personal considerations would have led me to postpone the measure, in order to have employed the interval in seeking more information: desirous, however, of complying with the earnestly expressed wish of many respected individuals, and entertaining the hope, that the plan when made public may excite the attention of others, so as to aid the labours of the committee in the next sessions, I have determined now to propose it.

I shall first shortly advert to the plans of those who have preceded me. Mr. Gilbert and Mr. East had each bestowed much time and attention on the subject: on their suggestions some important alterations have been made. The merit of these I propose not to question:—the radical defects of the system were not to be cured by palliatives, however wisely imagined; and, in fact, the evils resulting from the poor laws have since rapidly augmented.

Mr. Pitt's splendid talents will not be questioned by those most adverse to his political conduct. The magnitude of the evils just alluded to induced him to undertake the application of a remedy, but his bill did not, I believe, even travel into a committee, and he himself was convinced of its inadequacy. More recently, a gentleman eminently qualified from his knowledge of the subject, and whose great abilities and indefatigable attention pointed him out above all others as the fittest person for this undertaking, was not more successful. The able and eloquent speech of Mr. Whit-

bread on the occasion will be a lasting monument to his memory, equally creditable to his head and heart; valuable also, as it affords convincing evidence that he viewed the source of the evil in the poor laws themselves. The remedies proposed by him were the extension of education to the poor, and a national saving bank. The views of Sir William Pulteney, which Mr. Malthus seems also to have adopted, were to fix the amount of the sum raised in each parish, and to take off annually a certain proportion, till the whole was annihilated, and thus to let the poor laws expire. The plans proposed by Mr. Gilbert, Mr. East, and Mr. Pitt were designed to regulate indeed, but to maintain, the present system; those of Sir William Pulteney, Mr. Whitbread, and Mr. Malthus aimed at its abolition. With the latter gentleman I perfectly agree, thinking that nothing less than a total change of system can cure the evil. The abuse of the poor laws has transferred from the individual to the public, not merely the charge of providing for the casualties and misfortunes incident to humanity, but for the direct consequences of men's vice and folly. Economy and forethought are banished; improvidence and immorality encouraged. To restore the respectability and the happiness of the inferior classes, they must be brought back to those manners from which they have swerved. Their general good sense I think as highly of as any man, but, misled as they have been by depending on parochial relief, an immediate and complete reformation is not to be expected. From the debasement which has arisen out of that system, gradually operating for two centuries, half that period may perhaps be necessary before the stain can be removed,—until this can be effected I would by no means recommend any other than a gradual change in the system. In place of the present I shall recommend another from the adoption of which the same mischievous effects may be hoped not to result.

The present fabric is too massy to be at once removed, but it may be by degrees undermined, and another substituted.

The statute of the 43d Elizabeth has, whether intended or not, given to every poor man now in existence a perfect right of maintenance. This right I admit to its utmost extent: to innovate on it, I also admit, the fullest proof must be adduced, that the change is for the poor man's own benefit. Conscientiously satisfied that such ample proof can be offered before a committee, the first step I apprehend will be its appointment. Evidence may there be adduced, that the effect of the present system is to degrade the poor man as well in his own estimation as in that of the persons on whom the charge of maintaining him is devolved,—that his happiness is at an end—his existence embittered. The relief bestowed on him may remove indeed the cravings of hunger, but it is at the expense of all the best feelings of his nature. To restore independence of mind to the labouring classes is an indispensable ingredient in every plan for bettering their situation. Need there be any other proof requisite of this than the superiority of our people, on the whole, over every other nation? Whence does this arise Is it not among the blessed fruits of our free constitution, inspiring independence of mind and action, giving consequence in his own eyes to every member of the community? Hence has arisen the glory, the pre-eminence of England. Extinguish the vital spark of liberty, destroy the political character of the people, and we shall soon sink to a level with countries groaning under despotism! Is it then consistent either with sound policy, or with humanity, that three millions of people, or nearly a third of our population, should be suffered to remain in the degraded state of pauperism? The loss of public estimation takes away a principal incentive to right action, and lessens the influence of moral principle, which places the reward of merit in the esteem of the virtuous.

On this ground, beyond all others, does this measure press itself on the consideration of the House.

The sums now collected for the poor are an intolerable burden: the industrious, who are now compelled to contribute to the support of the idle and the profligate, though their utmost exertions are hardly adequate to procure support to their own families, are daily depressed into the class of paupers. It will not be questioned by those who have paid attention to the past and present state of the poor, that their moral condition has undergone a most unfavorable change, and particularly within the last fifty years, during which period the sum collected for their maintenance has quadrupled. The increased wealth of the nation, advancing their wages, has at the same time lessened their happiness. By destroying the principle of economy their wants have augmented beyond their earnings. The present moment has acquired undue preference, as compared with the future. Much is this change to be lamented, as it operates on their moral and philosophical happiness. Moral happiness dwells in the mind: philosophical happiness consists in wanting little: in contradiction to it, worldly or vulgar happiness is to want and enjoy much. Thus it will be invariably found, that where the earnings are greatest the forethought is least. I have had an opportunity of being convinced, thoroughly, of this fact, from the circumstance of employing two distinct classes of persons; one, miners, whose earnings are from 20s. to 30s. a week; the other, agricultural labourers, whose wages vary from 10s. to 15s. Whilst those with the larger wages are perpetually contracting debts with all those with whom they deal, the others pay their way, and have the appearance, at the same time, of possessing more comforts. The want of economy is the source of misery: the poor rates, which have this direct tendency, have therefore had the effect, I humbly conceive, to destroy the happiness of the poor, at the same time that they waste the wealth of the public.

It is not my intention to found any part of the plan proposed on the existing poor laws, but rather to anticipate their speedy extinction, or, at least, to confine their operation to the relief of the description of poor designated by the 43d of Elizabeth ; I shall not, therefore, trouble the House with more than a very cursory view of their rise and progress, in order to show their effect in destroying the comforts and happiness of those whom they have been applied to relieve.

The emancipation of the labourer from feudal bondage caused numbers to quit their former habitations, with the hope of bettering their condition. Those who were disappointed in procuring employ were driven to seek a precarious subsistence on charity. By these means mendicity was increased to a degree occasioning great inconveniences to society, and the most severe sufferings to large classes of persons. This produced a variety of statutes, permitting begging of alms, and enjoining charity towards the indigent. The author of the *Mirror* states, that by the common law, the poor were ordered to be subsisted by parsons, rectors of the church, and the parishioners, so that none of them die for default of subsistence. In what a state must society then have been, to induce the legislature to enforce charity by act of Parliament ! The dissolution of monasteries rendered the situation of the people still more deplorable, and augmented the number of mendicants.¹ To what an extremity

¹ "It is curious," says Dr. Burns, in his *History of the Poor Laws*, "to observe the progress, by what natural steps and advances the compulsory maintenance becomes established. First the poor were restrained from begging at large, and were confined to beg within certain districts. Next the several hundreds, towns corporate, parishes, hamlets, or other like divisions, were required to sustain them with such charitable and voluntary alms, that none of them, of necessity, might be compelled to go openly in begging and the churchwardens or other substantial inhabitants were to make col-

this at length had come, may be inferred from a statute passed in the first year of the reign of Edward VI. "It is enacted, that if any one shall be idle for the space of three days, he may be seized and set to work : if he attempt to escape, and shall be absent for the space of fourteen days, and then retaken, he shall be branded with the letter S, and become the slave of his employer." Miserable must have been the state of the country when such an inhuman remedy could be suggested. This statute remained in force for near four years ; a dreadful monument of the misery of the times, and of the little consideration paid to the voice of humanity.

During the reign of Elizabeth, the state of the poor often occupied the attention of Parliament : in the 43d year of her reign was passed that statute on which the present system of poor laws is founded. It is highly important to attend to the terms of the enactment by which relief is granted. "For the necessary relief of lame, impotent, old, blind, and such other among them being poor and not able to work ; and also of putting out such children to be apprentices."

lections for them with boxes on Sundays, and otherwise, by their discretion ; and the minister was to take all opportunities to exhort and stir up the people to be liberal and bountiful. Next, houses were to be provided for them, by the devotion of good people, and materials to set them on such work as they were able to perform. Then the minister after the gospel every Sunday was specially to exhort the parishioners to a liberal contribution. Next the collectors for the poor, on a certain Sunday in every year, immediately after divine service, were to take down in writing what every person was willing to give for the ensuing year ; and if any should be obstinate and refuse to give, the minister was gently to exhort him ; if still he refused, the minister was to certify such refusal to the bishop of the diocese, and the bishop was to send for and exhort him in like manner ; then the bishop was to certify the same to the justices in sessions, was again gently to hear and persuade him ; and, finally, if he would not be persuaded, then they were

Such others amongst them being unable to work can only be construed to relate to the preceding description of lame, blind, &c. yet, strange as the construction appears, it has been made the foundation on which maintenance is granted to all classes of persons. The indigent, the idle, the profligate, have all equal claims for support: distinction between vice and virtue there is none.

If a doubt can remain on the mind of any one as to the views with which this statute was framed, I would refer them to the sum fixed, beyond which no parish could be assessed: this was restricted to sixpence in the pound on the value of rateable property. If we consider the annual revenue of the kingdom to have at that time amounted to five millions, and every parish rated to the utmost, it would have amounted to one hundredth part, or fifty thousand pounds. Most probably, it did not reach half this sum, or above twenty five thousand pounds. I conceive this as affording complete evidence of the limited extent to which Parliament intended that the system should be carried.

I question not the humanity of those who have construed it so differently from the sound policy on which it was enacted. It is greatly to be regretted the results have turned out so contrary to their intention. Little did they suppose the effect would be to destroy all economy and forethought,—transferring the maintenance of the laboring classes from their own shoulders to those of the public. Vain is the hope of bringing the law back to its first principles. The evils resulting from this act evidently began to be felt very shortly after its passing. In 1680 the sum raised for the support of the poor amounted to £665,206. If we admit the value of rateable property to have doubled in the

to assess him what they thought reasonable towards the relief of the poor. And this brought on the general assessment, in the fourteenth year of Queen Elizabeth."

eighty years from 1601; and to have reached ten millions, instead of being one fortieth, or more probably one eightieth, it was become one fifteenth.

The feelings and sentiments of the legislature are strongly marked by the acts of the 8th and 9th of William and Mary, for badging the poor. The extreme severity of the law shows how grievous the burdens for the maintenance of the poor were felt, and that it was deemed necessary to check the evil by attaching degradation to pauperism. The humanity of later times has removed it from the statute book: the extent of the evil had long rendered the enforcing it impracticable. The act is so strong a proof of the rapid diffusion of the mischievous effects of the system, that I cannot omit reciting a part of it to the House.

“ Every such person as shall be upon the collections and receive relief of any parish or place, and the wife and children of any such person cohabiting in the same house, (such child only excepted as shall be by the churchwardens and overseers permitted to live at home, in order to attend an impotent and helpless parent) shall, upon the shoulder of the right sleeve of the uppermost garment, in an open and visible manner, wear a large Roman P, together with the first letter of the name of the parish or place whereof such poor person is an inhabitant, cut either in red or blue cloth, as by the churchwardens and overseers shall be directed: and if any such poor person shall neglect or refuse to wear any such badge or mark, it shall be lawful for one justice to punish such offender, either by ordering his allowance to be abridged, suspended, or withdrawn, or otherwise by committing him to the house of correction, to be whipped and kept to hard labour, not exceeding twenty-one days: and if any churchwarden or overseer shall relieve any such poor person not wearing such

badge, and be thereof convicted on oath of one witness before one justice, he shall forfeit twenty shillings by distress, half to the informer and half to the poor."

From year to year the malady has been augmenting. The amount of the poor rates in 1760 was not quite two millions : in the last fifty-six years they have quadrupled. It will not, I believe, be difficult to assign the causes that have produced this melancholy change, presenting us with such an accumulated prospect of human misery. From 1760 we may date a great revolution in the state of the country ; from that period we began to become a great manufacturing nation ; agriculture shortly after declined. By the politicians of those days it was viewed as a subordinate object. The wealth of the country was doubtless rapidly augmented : luxury spread its baneful influence through all ranks of society. The price of labour rose, and the earnings of the working classes were increased, though not their happiness. The demand for workmen in the various manufactories transferred to them numbers from the peaceful occupation of agriculture. The habits of their former lives were soon lost : higher wages were obtained, more expensive habits acquired, and no thought taken, or provision made, for any reverse. Temporary depressions of trade occurred ; the numbers that were thus at once exposed to hunger and the extreme of misery were too great for private benevolence to succour : so numerous were the demands for parochial relief, that all sense of shame was lost sight of. The plague is not more rapid in its progress than this malady has proved itself. The example of one great town quickly extended to another, and in a short period pervaded the whole kingdom. To so shameless a pitch is it now arrived, that pauperism is contemplated and calculated on in the very outset of life : instances are not wanting of parties applying im-

mediately after being married for relief from the parish. What was strictly the sole inheritance of misery is now indiscriminately claimed as a right appertaining to all.

Amongst the agricultural classes this contagion has been spread by other means. Motives not creditable to the parties have contributed to their debasement: with a view of keeping down wages parochial relief was resorted to. The price of grain was taken as the barometer. It does not seem to have been considered what was likely to result from a practice so degrading: by thus rendering the labourer dependent, and compelling him to look to others and not to his own endeavours for support, all economy and forethought vanished; to husband his little gains was to relinquish his own enjoyments for the benefit of a parish. This sacrifice of independence was attended at the commencement with regret; the opinion and respect of neighbours was a strong tie, and operated to keep alive the feelings of independency, when no such means were resorted to, till the late years of scarcity; these have nearly extinguished that honest pride that called forth great exertion rather than submit to pauperism. The mistaken views of some, together with misfortunes of the times, and the effects of example, have nearly reduced the whole of the working classes to a state of pauperism; every sentiment of shame is lost sight of, and with it all consideration beyond that of the present moment. To stop the progress of this alarming malady, in modern times, expedients have been resorted to which bear a strong analogy to the policy which produced the act of the 8th and 9th of William and Mary, I mean the erection of workhouses for the reception of the poor. The principal object of these receptacles seems to have been not to accommodate the needy, but to deter them from applying for relief: as a preliminary every domestic comfort was to be sacrificed—their little property seized for the benefit

of the parish—every hope of returning to their own fireside extinguished. Who can view these mansions of misery without horror? This springs from that radical error in the administration of the poor laws which confounds vice and virtue, and equally entitles both to relief. To guard against the idle and the profligate the unfortunate are the victims. Every feeling heart must deplore that a fellow creature should be exposed to such a cruel alternative.

The best regulated poor houses present a dreadful state of existence—a society with no one common bond of feeling—every endearing relation destroyed. In its place a principle of savage selfishness pervading all classes—engendering mutual jealousy and hatred. Age, infirmity, youth, idleness, and profligacy indiscriminately huddled together. Can any mortal contemplate such a conclusion of life, and not bless the attempt to preserve him from it? I put it to every gentleman's feelings who hears me, if he can doubt the poor of England will hail any change of system which will in its operation secure to them the enjoyment of their peaceful habitations and domestic comforts? Yes, they will gratefully acknowledge to God and you the escape from this misery, which the poor laws now hang over their head.

Every motive of humanity as well as policy calls on us to endeavour to devise means for securing so large a portion of our fellow creatures from the degraded situation to which they are reduced. Eight millions expended, and that without promoting the happiness of one individual who participates in it. If the evil is suffered to proceed, the whole industry and revenue of the country will be inadequate to support the poor—not a comfortable, happy, but a dissatisfied and degraded poor, who discover when it is too late, that improvidence and want of economy, which makes them a burden to others, robs them of every comfort of life.

Such are the baneful effects of these laws, their contaminating influence is felt by all ranks. In the higher orders it has lessened those feelings of compassion and interest that would otherwise have been felt for the afflicted: the resources of a parish suspend the claims of charity.

In destroying this system you will render mankind more alive to the feelings of benevolence; every one will then find he has a duty to perform, which under existing circumstances he may consider as not imperiously binding on him.

A sum of eight millions judiciously applied to the relief of the really necessitous and industrious poor would extend the scale of comforts, which might be afforded them, infinitely beyond what ever has yet been in contemplation or practice.

The labouring classes of Great Britain are, at the bottom, a reflecting and moral people, capable of forming a correct judgment on any plan proposed for their benefit. They will not be slow in appreciating the advantages of depending on their own exertions rather than trusting to those of others. I may be too sanguine in the views I have taken: my firm belief, however, is that some plan founded on the principles which will govern what I shall have the honor of submitting to the house, would meet with the approbation of a great majority of the lower orders. No period for the discussion of this momentous question can be more favorable than the present. Splendid as is the renown which the nation has required by its naval and military exploits, these will not form the most brilliant and striking feature in the future history of the present times. The admiration of succeeding ages will be directed to that revolution that has and is operating on the moral state of man by the system of education introduced by Bell and Lancaster, which in its progress will multiply the happiness of every succeeding age by in-

creasing its habits of virtue and probity. In twenty years we may fairly contemplate that there will scarce be an individual to be found who will not possess the means of making himself acquainted with his duty to God and man.

The blessed effects of a general system of education, I hold equally high with Mr. Whitbread, and consider it as the foundation on which is to be built any system for bettering the condition of the people of England. Whatever can lead men to curb their passions and teach them to oppose the future to the present, must be attended with the most important results to their happiness.

Disposed as I am to look to education as a most powerful auxiliary, so great is the evil with which we have to contend, that it would not, in my humble opinion, be safe to confide in any plan that did not offer not only an equal but extended scale of support for the afflicted.

I am neither called on nor disposed to enter into the discussion of any abstract principles. It matters not whether every human being be entitled to a support from the produce of the earth; or that the most imperious duty on man after the payment of debts is the exercise of charity. I am disposed to allow every latitude that can be required to the claims of misery, and to agree that the exercise of benevolence is the highest source of human enjoyment.

Nor is the axiom less true that it is an imperious duty, binding on every mortal, to exert his utmost endeavours for the support of himself and those he has contributed to bring into the world. By the sweat of his brow man is ordained to earn his bread. No claim can honestly be set up for relief till every effort has been made and failed. The neglect of this principle has brought on the nation the evils it now endures; unless the consent and opinion of the working classes can be brought back to a recognition of this truth, it is in vain to look for relief from any remedy that can be proposed.

To one half of the empire only do the poor laws extend. Great as is the scale of misery that unfortunately prevails in Ireland, constant and unceasing as are the claims for relief, the appeal is never without effect. To the honor of that country its charity is unbounded. The stream of benevolence flows unceasingly, the indigent themselves view it as an indispensable duty not to refuse their mite. This affords a proof that when there is no other provision than that of charity all are disposed to exercise it.

In Scotland the number of parochial poor is about one in sixty. The whole poor of that country are calculated from thirty to thirty-six thousand. The expenditure for their support supposed to be about 3*l.* each, and the total expence not exceeding one hundred and eighty thousand pounds. Nothing can afford a stronger proof of the influence of moral and philosophical principles on the conduct and character of a nation, than this view of the laboring classes presents. Voluntary charity is in most instances adequate to all the claims of the unfortunate. The scale of crime is as narrowed as that of necessity. Education and attention to the duties of religion produces the happiest effects on the condition of the lower orders in that country, and encourages us in looking to the same effects from recurrence to the same means. Had our system of poor laws extended to that country, its inhabitants would have been equal sharers in the misery which has resulted from them in this country. A corroborating proof of this arises in a parish in Dumfriesshire, where they have funds for the maintenance of the poor, amounting to between two and three thousand pounds per annum. The number of inhabitants in this parish is supposed to be nearly eight hundred, the greatest part of whom are in a state of pauperism, depending on charity for their support. An adjoining parish has a population of 2,500 souls, and there are in it but

two paupers. Can any thing afford a more incontestable proof of the destructive effects arising out of a state of dependence from the poor looking to any means of support besides those arising from their own industry, prudence and forethought? I might rest the whole argument on the propriety of destroying the poor laws, on this singular instance of the baneful effects of the laboring poor transferring the care of providing for themselves to others. So destructive is the principle that it operates an entire change in the national character.

I beg to call to the recollection of the House a petition which I had the honor of presenting from the rope-makers at Chatham, complaining that the superannuation pension of from 15 to 20 pounds per annum was inadequate to their support, and did not prevent their often becoming chargeable to the parish. This is a further proof of the consequences of transferring to others the care of our own concerns. Reliance on these funds destroys that prudent forethought that can alone keep the lower orders from a state of dependence.

To the fostering care and attention of a right honorable gentleman (I mean Mr. Rose) in the establishment of Friendly Societies much praise is due. I am sensible they have been of great national service. At the same time it must be admitted that the system is liable to great objections. In the first place the relief they afford is in very many cases inadequate to the necessities of the party, and compels a recourse to parochial assistance, which is destructive of the first and most important principle. The loss of time and consequent expence attending these establishments are serious objections: where the payment of every member is alike, it is in vain they can be expected to consent the allowances should be proportioned to the individual wants of the party. The present moment outweighs all considerations for the future. I have often attempted the application of the

principle of giving with some regard to the number of children, but could never succeed.

I now come to the immediate consideration of the plan I would with great deference suggest as a substitute for the poor laws. It may probably intitle it to a more favorable reception when I state that it is not founded on mere theory. It has the experience of upwards of thirty years to plead, in which period it has raised above twenty thousand pounds. Much individual misery has been solaced, the pressure on the parties has been light, and but for this compulsive forethought, probably the whole, or by far the greatest part of this sum had been wasted or spent in public houses. It cannot be denied that from drunkenness arises, in a very great degree, the miseries of the lower orders. Few who would not be enabled, by the sacrifice of a part of what is spent in the destruction of their health and the happiness of their families, to provide an ample fund for the casualties of life. The workmen employed in the Workington and Harrington collieries are constrained to contribute 6d. a week to a fund for their mutual support—the proprietor paying a third of the sum subscribed. The scale of weekly relief is considerable ; in case of serious accident the party has a guinea in advance to supply immediate wants, medical assistance is provided. A sum of money is given on the death of parents or children. A committee chosen by the workmen have the management of the funds, and is presided over by an agent. In this point I must admit it has been failing. The strict application of relief to proper objects has seldom been sufficiently attended too. Indeed it was scarce to be expected that the committee would charge itself with the odium of detecting their immediate comrades. There wanted some other interests to keep that watchful attention which could alone prevent frauds and impositions. Though it has not done all the good it was capable of, it has been of infinite service to the individuals, and of great bene-

fit to the parish.¹ It may be asked, are not the wages higher in consequence of the payment of 6d. a week to this fund? I answer, no; I rather believe that if the funds had been more prudently managed, it would have been a powerful inducement in drawing men to the works. I have seldom heard in the long period of 33 years an objection made to the payment, though the men came from all quarters, many of them without any intention of remaining for any length of time in the employ. This indeed encourages me to believe there would be less objection to such payments than might at first sight be supposed. It is from conviction of individual benefit that weighs with the parties, not personal influence, as might be supposed.

What I should propose to the House would be that every individual who made any profit or advantage of his labor, should contribute towards the establishment of a parish fund for the relief of sickness, age or misfortune, for the encouragement of industry and good morals, for a general plan of education, and such other objects as might be conducive to the comfort and happiness of the laboring classes. That to this fund capitalists and property should contribute. That all ranks and classes in society should join in promoting a system for bettering the situation and increasing the comforts of the great bulk of the nation.

Supposing the contributions to be as follows :

697,353	families returned as employed in agriculture at 12d. per family per week	1,813,117
923,588	families occupied in trade and manufactories at 12d.	2,401,328
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1,620,941	families constituting a po-	4,214,445

¹ Sir F. Eden has in his valuable work on the Poor, noticed the society, as has the Board of Agriculture.

pulation of upwards of
seven millions, six hun-
dred thousand souls.

191,225	families supporting them- selves by trade or income at 4s. per week	994,370
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191,225	families of privileged or- ders, &c. on a regulated scale to be fixed by refe- rence to the assessed taxes at 8s.	1,988,740
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382,450		2,983,110
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At 1d. per head paid by persons employing workmen	1,054,611
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1d. per head contributed by proper- ty now rateable	1,054,611
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2,109,222

By laboring classes 4,214,445

By other classes 2,982,110

By capital and land 2,109,222

Total . . 9,305,777

I submit this only as a cursory view of the subject, to show what an enormous sum may be raised by calling forth the united contributions of all classes. I have considered 10s. as the lowest wages that the laborer would receive. The proportion would not exceed a thirtieth of their gains. All should contribute, but none in a higher ratio. The contributions would be nearly equal from those who were to be

partakers of the fund, and those who must be considered as only contributors to it, with a view of augmenting the general state of happiness. Such a fund, properly administered, could not fail of extending consolation to the afflicted beyond all example. Nor would the effects be confined to those merely who were objects of distress. Rewards for good conduct would naturally form a part of a plan that aimed at elevating the situation of the great body of the people. One material vice of the old system must be avoided. Flagitious conduct or conviction of crime or misdemeanour, must exclude such individuals from being subscribers to the parish saving fund. Education should be universal. The House cannot forget the frightful picture drawn of the state of education in the metropolis, by the member for Winchelsea (Mr. Brougham); though I trust there cannot be any thing like eighty thousand children devoid of all instruction. If it exists in a tenth part it is sufficient to interest every friend to humanity in applying a remedy.

Encouraging the people to virtuous conduct, inculcating by every possible means habits of frugality and forethought, would be the primary objects to be aimed at. I am sanguine that when this was fairly understood there would scarce be found an individual so insensible to his individual happiness as to withhold the sacrifice of a pot of beer to secure his own independence.

The success of this, as of every other plan must principally depend on its execution. I confidently reckon on the cordial co-operation of all ranks. The evils of the old system are universally felt, and when the task of bettering the situation of so large a portion of the community was once delegated by the legislature to the public, that philanthropy and spirit for which this kingdom is so conspicuous would unite all ranks in so glorious a work as that of promoting national happiness. I should propose the government of these funds,

together with the formation of rules and regulations to be observed, to be vested in the hands of a committee. This body to be elected from the laboring classes, their employers and the representatives of landed and other property. Each parish would be thus at liberty to adopt such rules and regulations as the particular situation of the place required. It is not necessary for me to trouble the House with all the details that may be requisite for carrying the plan into execution. I should recommend the rules approved by each committee to be registered at the sessions, in order that any party who might be disposed to question the propriety of them, might appeal to the sessions, the magistrates having authority to quash, but not to enact—One third part of the committee to be annually changed—The rules to be revised every fifth year, so as to keep alive a constant attention towards perfectionating the system. It is one of the most important problems in legislation to determine what the state ought to take on itself to direct by public wisdom, and what it ought to leave to individual discretion.

I view with particular complacency this part of the plan, which intrusts to those who are to be relieved, a share in the administration of their funds. I consider it as likely to contribute to elevate the condition of the working classes. It presents a legitimate object of ambition—one fairly within their reach—connected with probity—the reward of honesty and good moral conduct. The influence of honorary distinctions is made available as the highest rewards that can be held out for acts of valor, may they not equally be offered as the recompence to virtue?

It is not easy to calculate the inestimable advantages which may result to the nation by calling into action all its worth and abilities. Fourteen thousand committees, constituted as I have a right to suppose they would be, could

not fail of producing such a code of laws as would embrace every object calculated for promoting morals and industry, and consoling misery.

The intercourse to which this plan would lead between the higher and lower classes in society, could not fail of being attended with the most beneficial results. Whilst it called forth the interest and attention of the one to the welfare of the other, it would increase the sentiments of respect and veneration on the part of the people for their superiors.

I should superadd another motive to stimulate to exertion; as the funds increased so should the contributions diminish. Thus would it become not only the collective but the individual interest of every member of the parish to have the funds economised.

The accumulations to be lodged from time to time in the hands of the receiver general, to be placed on government securities. Proper officers to be appointed in every district for receiving or furnishing money, as occasions might require. I do not think any thing more delightful could be proposed than that of calling on all ranks of society to unite their endeavours to multiply human happiness. If the other parts of the plan would admit of as much being said in its favor, I should anticipate the most favorable results.

Contrast the government I propose for the poor, with that under which it is at present. A hind or an ignorant overseer, driven reluctantly into the office, harassed and perplexed by perpetual unceasing applications, adopting the most unfavorable estimate of human nature, compelled equally to relieve the unfortunate and worthless—All are soon viewed through the most unfavorable medium. Contempt and hatred extinguish all sentiments of compassion, harshness and brutality are in consequence dealt out to all. How different would be the treatment of the poor when

they had a part of their own body superintending their concerns—alive to their distresses by a sentiment of fellow feeling. It would be the wish of all to console the afflicted, and to relieve the virtuous. There would be an interest also to curb the excesses of the thoughtless. The duty of the magistrate is to punish—his powers are only called into action when society has suffered an injury. A committee elected by the free choice and esteem of a parish would possess an influence of opinion, that might with admirable effect be exercised in curbing those vices which lead to crime. This operation of opinion would have a powerful effect on the whole community.

In providing for the laboring and manufacturing poor, it would ill become us to be unmindful of those brave men who fight the battles of their country. It is highly painful to see the veteran who has suffered in his country's cause begging his bread. I should propose a stoppage to an equal amount to be made from the pay of the army and navy, and a proportionable part paid to these funds by the country. By this means they would be secure of a maintenance on the conclusion of their services, if unable to earn their livelihood. Lest I should be mistaken, I would notice that I would propose to include all mariners and others in the provision previously proposed.

There is still another class of unfortunate beings for whom provision should be made, who are punished for the sins of their parents, I mean natural children who are abandoned by their parents and left without care and protection. Strangers to those tender attentions, which imprint on the heart influences which operate on the character through life; with tempers soured, wanting education, it is not to be wondered at if these should be found amongst the most worthless members of society. To reclaim, to remedy the injuries of these unfortunates, is worthy the

generosity of a great nation, and would be at once an act of justice and munificence. The penalties, by law inflicted on the parents, I mean not to intermeddle with. When no means of maintenance can be obtained from the parents, the children, after five years of age, should be taken and educated at the national expense, the boys placed in the navy and army, to serve for a certain period. The girls to be in like wise educated, and each parish in its turn to be required to furnish proper situations to bind them out as apprentices. Thus would national morals be improved, and the happiness of many human beings be secured. What may be the number of bastards annually born I can only conjecture: it was supposed about thirty years ago the number of illegitimate children was in the proportion of one to twenty-eight of those born in wedlock: this would make the number then about nine thousand. In France, at that period, the number of bastards was considered as one in fourteen. I fear, at present, the number is greatly increased in our own country, and may be as one to fourteen, or eighteen thousand. I have recently seen it stated, that out of somewhat less than twenty-three thousand children born at Paris, eight thousand were bastards. What proportion of bastards are supported by their parents, I have no data to justify any conjecture. The education and maintenance of each child may be calculated at between eight and ten pounds; at a very early age they might be made capable of contributing something towards their own support.

There must be still some means of maintaining those who should be bereft of the means of providing for themselves: the lunatic, the blind, and others having no provision from property, and incapable of administering to their own wants; these must be the annuitants of the public. It might be highly expedient, therefore, to bring

back the 43d of Elizabeth strictly to such cases. There are large existing charities, which might be employed to much better purposes than what they are: the amount of these will ere long be brought under the observation of the legislature, and may form a part of future inquiries on this subject.

There will unfortunately occur instances of persons of notorious character, or convicted criminals, who being excluded from subscribing to the parish funds, may be reduced to the necessity of requiring relief: whilst the public administered to their necessities, it would be justified in fixing such marks of stigma as might operate in deterring others from following their example. To such persons badging might probably be applied with a general benefit, and could not be abused; it would therefore stand on very different grounds to what it was formerly applied.

I have omitted hitherto to advert to one most material consideration connected with this subject, I mean the laws relative to settlements; out of this has arisen an endless source of litigation and expense. By the statute of Richard II. c. 7. and that of Henry VII. c. 12. the poor are directed to abide in cities and towns where they were born or had dwelt for three years. These are the first rudiments of parish settlements.

Till the 26th of Henry VIII. c. 26. there was no compulsory method chalked out for the purpose. By the statute of Charles II. c. 12. inhabitancy, apprenticeship, a service of forty days are made to confer settlements: the act directs that all intruders may be removed by two justices of the peace unless settled on a tenement of £10 per annum. The preamble to that act is a very curious representation of the state of the country at that period. "That, whereas, by reason of some defects in the law, poor people are not restrained from going from one parish to another,

and therefore endeavour to settle themselves in those parishes where is the best stock, the largest commons and wastes to build cottages, and the most woods for them to burn and destroy ; and when they have consumed it, then to another parish, and at last become rogues and vagabonds, to great discouragement of parishes to provide stock, when it might be destroyed by strangers." By the 1st of James II. c. 17. forty days were to be accounted after notice given. By the 3d and 4th of William and Mary, c. 11. it was further required that notice should be had at the church, and a statute of the 8th and 9th of the same reign enacted the machinery of certificates, that has since in a great measure been done away. The recent act of Mr. East, or the 35th of George III. restrains removal till the party becomes actually chargeable. Extending the power of requiring settlements was calculated at the moment to benefit both individuals and the public. Inconveniencies have arisen from it that were not foreseen, so true is it that political wisdom changes with the state of society. This is now become one of the most prominent evils of the system. I should propose to bring back settlements to their original simplicity, that of birth and residence ; and in case of marriage the husband's settlement to become that of the wife. Nothing surely can be more reasonable, that a life spent in active labor should convey a right of settlement : it is to be supposed his services have contributed to the wealth and prosperity of the spot. At the close of life to separate him from all his connexions and acquaintances, and transport him to a place where all memory of time is lost, is an act of unjustifiable cruelty.

In order to remedy a great evil arising out of the present system of settlements, I would propose a power should be given to parishes to purchase settlements for their supernumerary hands, so that when from a change of circumstances

they were incapable of finding work for all their labourers, they should be at liberty to look out and transfer them to such quarters as they could be employed in with advantage. The public and the individuals would be mutually gainers by the exchange.

The effect of establishing parish funds would undoubtedly be to raise the wages of the labourer in those districts, where an advance on the poor rates constitutes a part of the payment: this would, in the view I have taken of the subject, be for the advantage of all parties. It is to be hoped that the price of the necessaries of life will, when once fairly settled, be less subject to those variations which bear so hard on the working classes.

I have some doubts whether I may not have estimated the produce of agricultural labor too high, in supposing the gains of each family calculated, as consisting of six persons, to amount to thirty shillings. I have, however, premised, that I would in no instance take more than 4d. and that sum not to exceed a thirtieth part of the earnings of the party. That the difficulties which will attend this, or any other material change of system, are great, cannot be denied: I do not anticipate opposition from the quarter where many look for it, I mean on the part of the laboring poor. The comforts the plan holds out to them will be felt and appreciated; it will afford them many solid consolations, and exempt them from sufferings which can only be tolerated from the oppressive burdens now imposed, the benefit of which reaches not the poor.

Grateful to the House for the indulgence they have shown me, I shall not trespass longer on their time. I am fully sensible of the importance of the subject, I again repeat the apologies I offered at the outset: I am sensible the plan I have suggested, under the most favorable construction, will require much amendment to adapt it to practice.

In one point I believe there is a general concurrence of opinion, that a remedy must be sought for to put a stop to an evil that cannot much longer be endured. A due regard to the happiness and comfort of the laboring classes demands this of us, not less than the indispensable necessity of relieving a great part of the community from burdens destructive of their industry and comforts. On these grounds, sir, I shall move that a select committee be appointed, to take into their consideration the laws relative to the maintenance and support of the poor. From their labors I anticipate such suggestions as may aid the House in adopting a system that will restore the laboring people their independence, and with it an increase of happiness; and at the same time augment industry, and thereby promote the general prosperity of the empire.